

## **Developing Involved and Active Citizens: The Role of Personal Practical Theories and Action Research in a Standards-Based Social Studies Classroom**

**By Richard H. Chant**

As a social studies program coordinator at a regional-sized institution, I typically have between 20-25 preservice candidates enrolled in my annual undergraduate methods course. However, I usually have only one to two in-service candidates each year who require an advance methods course focused on such items as the historical influences, contemporary trends, and research within the social studies field. Recently, the single student in this course was Jonathan Frye, a graduate student and seven-year veteran social studies teacher in central North Carolina.

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Prior to beginning the semester, Jonathan and I met to discuss the possibilities regarding the curriculum and structure of the course. Neither one of us was pleased with the notion of meeting in the traditional three-hour per week format established for the course, prompting us to deliberate about alternative models. Guiding this deliberation were two important concerns regarding any potential process. One concern was ensuring that Jonathan experienced methods well supported by the literature within the field and that such methods, once

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identified, matched the subject matter he instructed (see Thornton, 1997). Since Jonathan had already completed a methods course as part of his undergraduate studies, my task would be to bridge Jonathan's prior experiences with his new learning by what Alder (1994) stated as "enabling teachers to bring appropriate knowledge and experiences to bear on their classroom practice" (p. 52).

I also wanted Jonathan to feel empowered and to understand that he is an important force in what his students have the opportunity to experience and learn. As Jonathan's advisor, we had already discussed the pressures, both explicit and implicit, related to teaching the content specified within North Carolina's *Standard Course of Study*. Jonathan had expressed that these pressures often influenced the curriculum because they force him to cover, in lieu of having his students analyze, the content under study. This expression reflected what Ross (1994a) described as the teacher-as-conduit model of instruction. Jonathan perceived his role as one who delivered previously selected curriculum (the conduit) as opposed to one who was given the responsibility to develop and make professional decisions regarding curriculum based on the needs of his community and learners.

From my own instruction, I've realized one way to strengthen my role as a professional decision-maker and help diminish the teacher-as-conduit model is to incorporate reflection within practice. Reflection can help illustrate how teachers hold the authority, and thus the responsibility, for initiating the curricular and instructional changes made within their own classrooms (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The call for reflection can be traced to Dewey's (1938) contention that experiences influence teacher beliefs and, once these beliefs are analyzed critically, provide the basis for professional growth. Schwab (1969) argued that teachers should rely on reflection as a way to examine how personal meaning impacts their curricular actions. Common to both of these arguments is how the examination of personal beliefs be a focus of inquiry when enacting curricular change. Others have also supported the sentiment that teacher beliefs have an influential, if not the central role in the implementation of curriculum innovation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Fullan, 1982).

Although the call for teacher reflection has been well pronounced, many teacher education programs today are not designed to use thoughtful reflection as a means to empower teachers (Galluzzo, 1999). This may stem from the complexity of quality reflection in that it requires critical thought, self-direction, and problem solving coupled with personal knowledge and self-awareness (Elliott, 1991). Given the charge of developing Jonathan's course, I wanted us to design a process that allowed him to experience how reflecting (grounded in his personal and professional experiences) on his practice (through a critical analysis of the literature) might lessen the negative impact of the teacher-as-conduit model. By this point in our conversations we had identified a number of key provisions that were emerging for this course: reflection, self-direction, personal and professional knowledge, growth, and empowerment. When considering ways to include these

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provisions, I suggested we examine how Jonathan could use personal theorizing and action research within his social studies classroom.

### **Personal Theorizing and Action Research**

Personal theorizing, the systematic reflection process undertaken by teachers in an attempt to recognize and utilize personal understanding as part of instructional improvement, can be a viable component within teacher development (Kleinsasser, 1992; Ross, 1992). Studies have suggested that teachers use a personal guiding theory to influence instructional actions and classroom decision-making (Chant, 2002; Clandinin, 1986; Cornett, 1990a; Pape, 1992). Cornett stressed that personal theory exists as a result of teachers' personal and professional experiences and that such theory, once recognized and understood, could be utilized as a basis for the improvement of practice. Given Cornett's assumption, the inclusion of personal theorizing may be a logical precursor for the completion of action research, or the attempt by teachers to improve their practice as a result of classroom experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). In support of our efforts, numerous studies have indicated that practicing teachers undergoing action research as part of their graduate education programs can lead to improved teaching and enhanced student learning (Burnaford & Hobson, 1995; Johnson & Button, 2000; Sax & Fisher, 2001).

### ***The Process***

I proposed to Jonathan that we adapt Cornett's (1990b) model of implementing action research in graduate curriculum courses for our methods course. The model includes three phases: the identification of guiding theory; the analysis of how such theory is manifested in practice; and the development and implementation of an action plan. Cornett's model was designed for and implemented in curriculum courses serving a variety of students within different programs and content disciplines. Cornett viewed action research "as a systematic means for the critical examination by teachers of their own practice and as a method for enhancing a spirit of teacher-as-reflective practitioner in each individual" (p. 188). As a result, he developed a general process to be applied by participants within their respective instructional contexts. This model enabled Jonathan to, in Cornett's terms, "analyze (his) own practice and to make decisions about (his) role in curriculum development" (p. 188).

We prefaced the project with a number of conversations in an effort to link Jonathan's previous coursework, teacher thinking, and the social studies. Jonathan had recently completed an educational issues course that prompted his interest in a variety of topics, including the impact of the implicit curriculum on teaching and learning. According to Jonathan, "We discussed the dominant ideology of society and the socialization of society through schooling. The process showed differences between schooling and education." As a result of these conversations, I provided Jonathan with a number of readings that could potentially help him see the rela-

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tionship between personal philosophy, hidden curriculum, and his teaching. These readings included Cornett's (1990c) case analysis of a secondary social studies teacher, a text on reflective practice within the social studies (Ross, 1994b), and an article I authored illustrating the impact of personal theorizing on social studies practice (Chant, 2002). Another goal of the early discussions and readings was to show Jonathan the possible value of the project and to alleviate some of the fears associated with entering an unknown process. I was pleased that we implemented this step because Jonathan later stated, "I felt naively ready for the course. Although apprehensive, I was also curious as to what the heck the outcome would be. I was also afraid that I might be overloaded and become consumed by the project."

#### ***Phase One***

We began the project with Jonathan answering the question, "What are your personal practical theories?" The term personal practical theories (referred to hereafter as PPTs) was developed by Cornett (1990a) as a way to describe the practical theories that represent the conceptual structures and images that guide teachers' actions (see also Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986). PPTs represent contributions grounded in both the teacher's personal experience (outside the classroom) and practical experience (inside the classroom) (Cornett, 1990a). In this phase, I wanted Jonathan to define each PPT as it related to his practice, justify why he believed the PPT guided his thinking, and illustrate (visually) the relationship among the PPTs. To help Jonathan answer the question, I had him develop a teaching autobiography. I emphasized the need to provide historical grounding, both personal and professional, as to why he was a high school social studies teacher. Jonathan was hesitant to write the autobiography. He stated, "I felt that I didn't need to write a paper about myself because I thought I knew myself well enough." Yet, as he developed the paper, he began to see the outside influences on his practice. Jonathan added:

As I wrote I realized how non-school activities, such as helping my nephew at home and jobs, such as being a morning aide for adults with developmental disabilities, have greatly influenced my development as a teacher. Very little of my autobiography dealt with actual teaching. I found this interesting and it, subconsciously at the time, helped me solidify my choices of PPTs.

As a result of the autobiography and discussions focused on the overlap and expansion of his beliefs, Jonathan identified the following set of PPTs:

- (1) Set a high tone of interaction and cooperation;
- (2) Teach to respect others and one's self and to think critically of society;
- (3) Teacher as provider of the opportunity to succeed;
- (4) Teacher as provider of holistic education; and
- (5) High level of organization and consistency.

Jonathan's written descriptions of the PPTs included his definition of each theory

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as well as an explanation as to why the theory guided his practice. For example, when defining his second PPT, related to respect, Jonathan wrote:

As I learned in my first year of teaching, pride doesn't get a person very far. Students should understand how to advocate for minorities, no matter a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, or religion. In my classes, students may role-play parts that are dissimilar to their backgrounds. Students experiencing the "devil's advocate" role whenever we have a debate over homosexuality, AIDS, gender, abortion, or racial-profiling benefit through insight and understanding. A White, male, heterosexual student with a ball cap declaring the rebel flag may play Thurgood Marshall in the *Brown v. the Board of Education* case.

He continued the description by justifying this PPT:

With the idea of respect comes dialogue. The students need to question and make informed choices for themselves. This summer a professor from a course I took really influenced me. He asked the educators in that course many questions that prompted more questions than answers. He explained viewpoints I had not imagined and my students should be privy to this information.

In an illustration representing the relationship among his PPTs, Jonathan placed organization and consistency (PPT 5) at the center of his instructional efforts. Jonathan commented, "Everything in my realm does not work unless it has a backbone of organization." He further argued that consistency is critical because, "... if students know their boundaries, they are much more conducive to learn." Organization and consistency were surrounded in his illustration by his remaining four PPTs. Jonathan added that these four PPTs mold his teaching process and support his core belief (PPT 5). Finally, external influences (e.g., hidden curriculum, students, biases) surround the entire model and, according to Jonathan, are forces that impact what and how he instructs.

### ***Phase Two***

Once we were satisfied with the definition and justification of each PPT, we began phase two by having Jonathan answer the question, "How are your PPTs manifested in practice?" During this phase, Jonathan systematically analyzed his PPTs to determine the amount of congruence between what he articulated as important (theory as described through his PPTs) and his classroom actions (practice). To determine the congruence, I asked Jonathan to select a minimum of three forms of data that represented his practice from which to complete the analysis. Jonathan chose the following data: (a) notes made while watching video recordings of four teaching episodes; (b) notes of multiple teaching episodes recorded by a peer; (c) results from two student surveys; and d) daily entries from his teaching journal.

To assist in the analysis, Jonathan developed a chart to guide and systematize this process. The chart was a table with his PPTs listed in the left column and the evidence used in the analysis represented in the right column. Jonathan reviewed

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the observational notes, survey results, and journal entries and made notations in the corresponding areas identifying practices that either supported or refuted his PPTs. For example, when analyzing the data to determine the existence of theory five (organization and consistency), Jonathan noted the following:

I have had several opportunities to see whether I am as organized as I feel I am. When I watched the videotapes I found that the students were as prepared as I was to start the day. I feel this is based on my organization because I set a high level of consistency on a day-to-day basis. Each day has started the same since the first day and the students seem to have a good grasp of what to do and how to do it. The first thing that my peer evaluator noticed was the manila folder I carry around with me to keep track of participation, assignments, and grades. It is my most overt organizational tool.

Jonathan's comments support his definition of PPT 5. He had indicated that to be organized is to be well prepared for an instructional day. The patterns that developed within his class and identified within the data further supported his stated need for consistency. However, the analysis also identified areas with lower levels of congruence between PPTs and practice. When examining the survey data in an attempt to find support for PPT 2 (teach to respect and to think critically of society), Jonathan wrote, "The data show that the teaching of respect is a part of my classroom. Yet, I do not teach the students to think critically of society as much as I thought I did." The notes from Jonathan's survey analysis state:

Critical thinking and my PPTs were less congruent. The survey asked, "Does Mr. Frye ask you to think about society and does he want you to learn more than what is in the book?" Some students stated that I question them to think about why they are at school. Some stated that I taught them that everyone has a choice, and that school standing does not necessarily equate with who you are as a person. But, I received more than a few answers saying either that I "probably do" teach these concepts but they can't remember or "no, he does not teach us about these things." I believe I do teach these critical thinking skills, but maybe to a lesser extent than I previously thought.

The entire PPT analysis led Jonathan to see two areas of his teaching that were open for improvement: the inclusion of strategies related to multiple intelligence (providing a holistic education) and the development of critical thought regarding the content under study. At this point, Jonathan and I met to discuss the findings and to generate an area of social studies inquiry grounded in the data analysis. Because of his developing interest in implicit curriculum, Jonathan said that he would be interested in seeing its influence on how he implemented different strategies focused on students' development of critical thought. We discussed a number of possibilities related to Jonathan's concerns and developed the following research question: How can I enable my students to realize that societal issues are embedded with multiple perspectives and that students need to recognize and understand these perspectives in an effort to become involved and active citizens?

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**Phase Three**

The third phase of the project began with Jonathan developing a literature review based on his research question. We met to discuss some initial options regarding the review and related resources. I gave Jonathan a copy of Engle and Ochoa's (1988) *Education for Democratic Citizenship: Decision Making in the Social Studies* because of its emphasis on counter socialization approaches (critical thought) in teaching social studies. A second text, *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues* (Evans & Saxe, 1996), was also provided to Jonathan to help with the early stages of the review. As his research progressed, it was clear Jonathan was focusing on connecting critical pedagogy with methods that could be applied in his current classroom. Although Jonathan felt that the research was not overly taxing, he did note that, "Establishing a flow between critical thinking/counter-socialization theory and practical applications was challenging." His review would ultimately illustrate the historical influences of critical thought on social studies methodology and concluded with a number of viable classroom applications congruent with Jonathan's PPTs. The review provided Jonathan with ample understanding to assist in his development of an action plan that addressed his research question.

Jonathan decided to develop a multi-week instructional unit centered on critical thought to be instructed in his ninth grade civics course. Influenced by state curriculum guidelines, Jonathan wanted the instruction to deal with issues (community, social, and environmental) currently challenging local government. Yet, because of his PPT analysis, Jonathan also wanted the unit to help students understand how people within the community viewed these issues and to help students act on their learning. As Jonathan commented:

I want to think about my PPTs when establishing objectives for the unit. The plans are to bring out critical thought paired with the idea that these students have empowerment in society. I want the students to interact with the community, their peers, as well as myself on a variety of levels. I would like to implement lessons that give each child the opportunity to experience independent study, group involvement, and compromise while building on the idea that they can make a positive change in society.

The ensuing instructional unit involved two elements: (1) the identification and investigation by students of local issues impacting their community (ongoing over a four-week period) and (2) the teaching and learning of local governmental functions and operations and how such operations impact issues within the community (four separate instructional foci used to support the first element). The unit translated into a teaching and learning experience that engaged Jonathan's students in an inquiry project that allowed them to explore the meaning of ordinances and how they impacted (negatively and positively) local citizens. In the early stages of the unit, his students investigated the impetus for a local teenage curfew ordinance, the implementation of user fees for garbage removal, and a local referendum revoking the sale of alcohol. These cases helped facilitate students' research expertise and

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acted as mechanisms that introduced the major activity of the unit: A collaborative inquiry project that identified and investigated a student-selected community issue that was either in need of regulation via an ordinance or in need of deregulation via the removal of an existing ordinance. Issues selected by students included community concerns regarding the influx of Mexican immigrants within the local population, prayer in public schools, racial profiling, regulation of tobacco use, and the impact of tobacco farming on land quality. To conclude the process, Jonathan's students were able to communicate to their community, via local print and radio media sources, the underlying components of the issues challenging their local community. Importantly, Jonathan's students were able to illustrate the diverse perspectives of those in their community and to share their newly formed and, we believe, well-grounded opinions regarding how to proceed to overcome these challenges.

Woven throughout the student projects was the understanding and analysis of the functioning of local government and its impact on the populace. Cognizant of his curriculum requirements, Jonathan wanted to ensure students knew essential information normally tested during the state-developed course exam. Yet, he wanted this content to be learned in a manner that supported the active engagement of his students in meaningful, value-based tasks.

Jonathan felt that the project blended his desire to implement active, non-traditional strategies requiring critical thought with the mandates established within the state curriculum. During the activities, the level of involvement by students was very high and Jonathan was pleased with their reaction to the project. In his summary Jonathan stated, "The activities had a very positive feel to them. We had a number of heated discussions and it was exciting to see students adamantly get involved with and really think about their learning." The project also helped Jonathan better understand the role of the implicit curriculum on what his students learned. By allowing students to select and investigate topics, Jonathan was able to reduce the influence of his personal bias that would normally occur when using more teacher-centered instructional strategies. Jonathan added, "The students had the greatest influence on what we studied. How they saw the issues, through their eyes and experiences and emotions, was the focus of the learning."

### **Conclusion**

As indicated, we had identified a number of provisions required for this course: reflection, self-direction, personal and professional knowledge, growth, and empowerment. We are both confident that these elements were included within Jonathan's experience and that they had an immediate and long-term impact on his teaching. Yet, the growth of his students was the largest benefit. We witnessed how students in a classroom could transform into citizens of a community. They collected information, categorized findings, challenged assumptions, and did so because they believed they could make a difference—embracing the role of an informed and active citizenry.

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For Jonathan, his reflective process was not only systematic, but was also grounded within his personal guiding theory. The PPT identification and analysis enabled Jonathan to rationally isolate an area of his practice that was open for improvement. His subsequent review of literature exposed a range of theoretical positions that aided Jonathan's repertoire of teaching knowledge and skills. Jonathan described how this new learning impacted practical applications by saying, "I've realized, because of the action research project, how to properly execute teaching that is active, thought provoking, and educational. I now realize the differences between thinking action and doing action." Carr and Kemmis (1986) identified two goals of action research: involvement and improvement. We believe that Jonathan met these goals and, perhaps more importantly, decreased the influence of the teacher-as-conduit model on his instruction. As Jonathan commented:

On the surface, I have realized that I can change as an educator for the better without outside administrative influence or observation. On a deeper level I feel that I understand my teaching better and I am more conscious of what and how I teach. Before this project, my teaching relied heavily on resources that came from books, the state curriculum, or overt sources. Now, I realize that lasting impressions on students come from me and my statements, comforts, and passions about life. I have realized, or more appropriately become more conscious of the fact that how I teach is just as important, if not more important, than what I teach. If I continue to grow as a teacher and reflect on my teaching strategies, then (and only then) I will truly feel that I have had some lasting contribution to school and society.

As I reflect on our experiences, I appreciate the initiative displayed by Jonathan. My role as facilitator was designed to assist his efforts to plan, design, and implement instructional change. Enderlin-Lampe (2002) suggested that helping teachers recognize that they have the capacity and power to make key decisions that impact what their students experience and learn is a critical component of teacher efficacy. Our distinct, but interconnected roles in this course may offer insight into such empowerment.

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